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LOW TO HIGH Δn TRANSITIONS
USING ELECTRO-OPTIC POLYMERS

CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

10 This application claims the benefit of prior filed U.S. provisional Application No. 60/408,763, filed on September 6, 2002, incorporated fully herein by reference.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

1. Field of the Invention

15 This invention relates to a method for coupling lightguides to fiber optic transmission lines.

2. Description of the Related Art

20 In the electro-optic or photonics industry, it is frequently necessary to couple lightguides with fiber optic transmission lines, e.g., when coupling an optical component on a circuit board to a light pipe. A major problem when coupling lightguides to fiber optic transmission lines is that typically lightguides have a high "refractive index difference" (Δn) percentage between the core and the cladding as compared to the Δn of fiber optic transmission lines. A typical on-chip or on-circuit
25 board planar lightguide has a Δn of 4-5%, while a typical fiber optic transmission line has a Δn of approximately 0.5-2%. This significant drop of Δn between the lightguide and the transmission line causes problem, e.g., reflection resulting in a reduction in the amount of light that can be transmitted. To solve this problem, optical coupling techniques have been used to ease the transition from this low-to-high or high-to-low
30 Δn 's, for example, lenses are used to focus (or spread) the light, making the transition more gradual. While functioning adequately, prior art techniques are custom solutions

that are costly and that take up significant space on a circuit board or other location where space is at a premium.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

5 In accordance with the present invention, the index of refraction in doped and/or “doped-and-poled” electro-optic polymers is controlled so that a gradual transition from a low Δn to a high Δn , or vice versa, is achieved for use in, for example, a lightguide-to-fiber transition. Multiple methods for creating this gradual transition are disclosed.

10 BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

Figures 1a-1c illustrate top, end, and side views, respectively, of a lightguide-to-optical-transmission-line coupler in accordance with the present invention;

Figure 2 is an index profile showing the change in the Δn values of regions 1-5 of Figures 1a-1c;

15 Figures 3a-3c illustrate top, end, and side views, respectively, of a lightguide-to-optical-transmission-line coupler in accordance with an alternative embodiment of the present invention;

Figure 4 illustrates the relationship of the time of the exposure of a cladding layer to doped source, to the Δn values with respect to the embodiment of Figs. 3a-3c;

20 Figures 5a-5f illustrates the selective removal process of the embodiment of Figs. 3a-3c;

Figures 6a-6c illustrate top, end, and side views, respectively, of a coupler which has formed thereon separated poling electrodes according to another embodiment of the present invention;

25 Figure 7 illustrates the resulting gradually increasing Δn value of the embodiment of Figs. 6a-6c;

Figures 8a-8c illustrate a common reference electrode and common poling electrode used to sandwich a tapered doped material according to another embodiment of the present invention; and

Figure 9 illustrates the decreasing Δn that results from applying a constant poling voltage to a doping material of increasing smaller thickness.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENT(S)

5 The overall concept of the present invention is the controlled changing of the index of refraction of doped and/or doped-and-poled electro-optic polymers from one region of the polymer to the next. This control can be performed by controlling the optical chromophore doping (percentage of chromophore by weight) of the polymer and the temperature of the polymer cure. In a doped-and-poled polymer, the strength of
10 the poling field is also a major variable, coupled with the doping percentage and, to some degree, the temperature at which the poling process takes place. Both the doping and the amount of poling can be selectively accomplished by masking and the strategic placement of poling electrodes using known techniques.

By changing gradually the index of refraction along a connection between a
15 lightguide and a fiber optic transmission line, the sudden change in the index of refraction between the lightguide and the fiber optic transmission line is alleviated, thereby alleviating the problems associated therewith. Several embodiments are described below for performing this gradual transition.

Figures 1a-1c and 2 illustrate a first embodiment of the present invention.
20 Figures 1a-1c illustrate top, end, and side views, respectively, of a lightguide-to-optical-transmission-line coupler in accordance with the present invention. Referring to Figure 1, a coupler 100 is shown having a core 102 and doping regions 1-5 on either side thereof. The high index core comprises an undoped polymer and the doping regions 1-5 are regions of increasingly heavier doping deposited sequentially along the
25 length (on both sides) of the high index core 102 as shown. The lowest doped region is region 1 and the highest doped region is doping region 5 with varying levels of increasing doping occurring in doping regions 2, 3, and 4, respectively. The regions of increased doping can be formed by, for example, selective deposition through a protective masking layer that is patterned photolithographically. The actual number of
30 depositions (or regions) is not limited to five and varies depending upon the required

Δn shift; thus, there may be greater or fewer doping regions, depending upon need. If the doping regions are large, shadow masking may be used. Polymer deposition can be accomplished by spraying, dipping, vacuum pyrolysis, or any other known deposition means which will produce the gradually increasing doped regions.

5 Figure 2 is an index profile showing the change in the Δn values of regions 1-5 of Figures 1a-1c. As can be seen, with each doping region, beginning with doping region 1, the Δn value increases incrementally from a low Δn at doping region 1 to the highest Δn at doping region 5.

 By providing a coupler 100 with these characteristics, a fiber optic transmission
10 line can be coupled at the end closest to region 1 (so that the low Δn percentage of the fiber optic transmission line will be close in value to that of region 1 of the coupler 100), and the lightguide can be coupled to region 5 of coupler 100 (so that the higher Δn value of the lightguide is more closely matched to region 5 of coupler 100) thereby resulting in a gradual transition from lightguide to transmission line.

15 Figures 3-5 illustrate an alternative embodiment of the present invention, in which doping regions 1-5 of increasing heavier doping are formed by diffusion doping of an undoped polymer (core 302 in Figure 3a) for varying periods of time. Using this method, an impurity source 520 (Figures 5a-5f), such as a very heavily doped polymer film, is deposited on top of the entire region 1-5 (the region to receive the progressively
20 increasing doping levels). Impurity source 520 is then selectively removed with time to create the increasing doped density, by position along the core, in the cladding layer. The selective removal process is illustrated in Figures 5a-5f. Specifically, at time T0, the entire doping region (all regions 1-5) are covered by the impurity source 520. At time T1 (Fig. 5b) the portion of the impurity source 520 covering region 5 has been
25 removed. At time T2 (Fig. 5c), the portion of impurity source 520 covering region 4 has also been removed; at time T3 (Fig. 5d) the portion of impurity source 520 over region 3 has been removed; at time T4 (Fig. 5e) the portion of impurity source 520 over region 2 has been removed; and finally, at time T5 (Fig. 5f) the last remaining portion of impurity source 520 over region 1 has been removed. Thus, the very heavily doped
30 polymer film is kept in place over different regions for differing amounts of time, with

longer diffusion times producing heavier doping and, thus, a larger Δn value. This diffusion doping can be performed with cladding polymer in the uncured state and is most accurate when the diffusion temperature is controlled to remain constant.

Figure 4 illustrates the relationship between the time of exposure of the cladding layer to the doped source, and the Δn values. As can be seen, the longer the doping time t , the greater the Δn value.

A third embodiment is illustrated in Figures 6a-6c and Figure 7. Referring to Figures 6a-6c, a coupler 600 has formed thereon separated poling electrodes 1-5, one set on the left and one set on the right, as shown in Fig. 6a. These are formed on a doped polymer layer 602 in a well-known manner. A reference electrode layer 603 is formed underneath the doped polymer layer 602 to provide a reference electrode for the individual poling electrodes. The doped polymer layer 602 is selectively poled along its length using larger and larger fields or poling voltages (E1-E5 of Fig. 7). A high poling field voltage applied to an electrode provides greater doping and thus greater Δn values than an area energized by a smaller poling voltage. Thus, by energizing electrode 1 with a lower poling voltage E1 and increasing the poling voltage sequentially along electrodes 2-5, a gradually increasing Δn value, from electrode 1 to electrode 5, will result, as shown in Figure 7. This results in a doped core surrounded by doped-and-poled cladding.

A further embodiment is illustrated in Figures 8a-8c and Figure 9. This embodiment takes advantage of the fact that an equal poling voltage applied to doped materials of different thicknesses will result in a higher Δn for the narrower doped material and a lower Δn for the thicker doped material. Thus, as illustrated in Figures 8a-8c, a common reference electrode 803 and common poling electrodes 805 (one on each side, as shown in Figs. 8a and 8b) are used to sandwich a tapered doped material 807 (e.g., an electro-optic film deposited as a combination core/cladding layer using, for example, spray deposition through a moving shutter, or by continuously changing the extraction range in a dip coating process). Because the doped material 807 is tapered, continuous poling electrodes 805 (one on each side) can be used because the constant applied voltage will produce a continuously changing field gradient (see

Figure 9) due to the changing thickness of the layer of doped material 807. This results in a coupler 800 that has a first end 810 that has a higher Δn than the other end 812, with gradually increasing Δn values therebetween. This is just another example of an embodiment of the present invention whereby a transition from low-to-high or high-to-low Δn values can be achieved to allow a smooth transition from lightguide to transmission line.

By virtue of the present invention, transitions between lightguides and fiber can be manufactured more cheaply and easily, and the resulting transition is smaller and less costly than those of the prior art. While the above-described embodiments describe some fundamental structures and implementation methods, it is understood that other possible combinations are possible and are covered by the pending claims. The key concept is that the index of the electro-optic polymer can be changed by doping, and changed still further by poling the doped region. With such ability to change a given polymer's index, there is no need to form complex transition structures by depositing ordinary materials of different dielectric constant and thickness. Other transitions can be made, such as vertical step-up and step-down structures, for example. With the proper choice of polymer and embedded chromophore, a reversible molecular polarization (or alignment) can be created, i.e., if the field is removed, the material reverts to its unaligned state. As the applied field increases, the index shifts in proportion to the field until full alignment (maximum Δn) is reached. Such an electrically controllable index change could be useful in directing incoming light beams to different detectors, thus producing a type of switch. Similarly, controlling index changes coupled with electro-optic interactions could also be useful in the modulation and demodulation of light beams. Many polymers exhibit this behavior when appropriately doped with optical chromophores, including polyimides and acrylics.

While there has been described herein the principles of the invention, it is to be understood by those skilled in the art that this description is made only by way of example and not as a limitation to the scope of the invention. Accordingly, it is intended by the appended claims, to cover all modifications of the invention which fall within the true spirit and scope of the invention.